

Friday, July 7, 1989

Syed Waliullah

AN ORIGINAL AUTHOR

ABOUT twenty years back I had a rare privilege of meeting a great Asian author: Syed Waliullah. It was an evening get-together of the city's intelligentsia. His fair face was wreathed in smiles. In reply to a question of mine he let me know very courteously

acclaimed by critics and lovers of literature alike. "Through the pages of this book, a country and its customs, almost unknown to France, are painted with small, delicate strokes that show the eternal nature of man," wrote Aux Ecoutes du Monde. In what is now Bangladesh, Lal Shalu created a furore when it first appeared in 1949, and since then it has seen many imprints.

them but gnawing, maddening hunger. One day in the month of July when the sun was high, the wind suddenly died down. But it was a good day for spear-fishing in the flooded rice fields. A fish could hardly move without the whole world knowing it; and one detected, it did not play around for long. Thus on a still day when a fish could not make the slightest movement without betraying its presence and getting speared, Majed, entered Mahabbatpur. Carrying hardly anything, he immediately struck root in the soil, deeper than the roots of the largest tree in the village.

"You are all blind," he cried out accusingly. You are ignorant men, men without understanding. If you were not, then how could you have left the grave—no it is not a mere grave—how could you have left the mazar unattended like this?"

Syed Waliullah, who lived for only 49 years, held various important positions at home and abroad. Married to Anne-Marie Louis Rositta Marcel Thibaud in 1955, he won the PEN award the same year for his drama Bahipir. For about a decade since 1955 he almost ceased writing and in 1964 his second novel Chander Amabashya saw the light of day and the third one, Kando Nodi Kando, came out four years later. Besides two other plays, Taranga Bhanga and Suranga, he published two collections of short stories, namely, Nayanchara and Dui Teer. His unpublished English works are Ugly Asians (dealing with socio-political issue), No Amarnath (novel) and How Does One Cook Beans (an Asian's adventure in France).

Of all other fine arts, painting remained his first love. Besides drawing abstract paintings, more often than not he made sketches of his friends. His review of Zubeida Agha's paintings made him known as an art critic. What is remarkable about Maqsd is that he gives us minute details—even the author's favourite dish has been mentioned—of the life of Syed Waliullah who enhanced the prestige of our literature worldwide.

A.U.M. FAKHRUDDIN

ly that he had not been very close to Jean Paul Sartre though both of them lived in Paris for quite some time. But, as he disclosed, he did come in contact with personalities like Andre Malraux, Graham Greene, Louis Aragon, Pablo Neruda, Stephen Spender and so on.

By all means he remains one of the great writers of fiction in Asia. On 16 March, 1967, the English translation of his celebrated Bengali novel Lal Shalu was simultaneously published from Chicago, London and Toronto under the aegis of the UNESCO.

Titled Tree Without Roots, it was translated by Anne-Marie Thibaud, Qaiser Rashid, Jeffrey Gibian and Malik Khayyam. Titled L'arbre sans racines, the French rendering by Anne-Marie Thibaud was published in 1965 by Editions du Seuil in Paris. Earlier in 1960 it was rendered into Urdu by Kalimullah and was published by the Writers' Guild in Karachi. Suffice it to say that the novel's circulation in two international language was a certain proof of Waliullah's recognition as an original, creative genius.

It is pertinent to question why was this book so widely

ssions.

An essayist in his own right, Sayed Abul Maqsd has established himself as a literary critic and researcher into this novelist of Bangladesh of international repute. His two-volume estimate of Syed Waliullah is as exhaustive as it is thought-provoking. Syed Waliullah's Jibon O Sahitya, published by Minerva Books, is comparable with any dissertation and merits careful study. Maqsd deserves unrestrained and full-throated applause for the painstaking labour he had to undergo in the process of collecting a large body of materials for this project. Often dispassionate in his assessment, he has presented Waliullah in his totality—as a man, an author and a citizen of the world. He never allows his vision to be blurred by emotion so that Waliullah gets the most desirable critical appreciation through the pen of Maqsd.

In a sense, Lal Shalu is a perfect social portrait of this small country where too many people live and suffer endless privations. The author throws light on a section of hypocritical priests who cash in on the credulity of the simple, unsophisticated village folk. With a profound insight into the milieu, Waliullah unfurls the factors responsible for exploitation of the villagers.

Thoroughly gripping, the opening passages give the reader an overall idea of the canvas: "There is little food and not enough land for all these people; there is nothing behind